

“THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON”: THOMAS VAUGHAN,

POE AND THE POETICS OF ALCHEMY

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ABSTRACT

The interpretive line of Poe as existentially but not necessarily philosophically Gnostic does little to explain Poe’s alchemical acumen or hermetic subtlety. That Poe was familiar with alchemical sources finds evidence in the volumes of alchemical lore Poe himself enumerates in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in the hermetic codification apparent in operations of “The Gold Bug” or may be deduced from Gnostic elements teased out from their post-human apparatus in works such as “Maelzel’s Chess Player.” What remains generally unrecognized is the hermetic literature Poe read, or the depth of influence of any such literature on Poe’s writing style or field of poetic images. This essay offers evidence of the origin of Poe’s phrase “the mountains of the moon,” and perhaps other imagery and conceits of Poe’s as well, in the work of the last of the classical British alchemists, Thomas Vaughan (1621-1666). Because Vaughn, the twin brother of metaphysical poet Henry Vaughn, was one of the few practicing alchemists to write in English; because he himself was a great writer; because his genre-crossing treatises bear certain similarities to Poe’s admixture of poetry and prose; and because an important piece of phraseology if not deep-imagery employed by Poe was also employed by Vaughan, the defrocked cleric might be considered perhaps not a source, but at any rate an influence on Poe. This perhaps chimerical conceit allows us an instructive portal into Poe’s poetics, Vaughan’s hidden message to the post-human in the secret language of the Rosicrucians and Heidegger’s notion of Transcendental Deception.

KEYWORDS: Poe, Thomas Vaughan, Rosicrucian Literature, Transcendental Deception, Alchemy

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INTRODUCTION

If as Freud suggests, what is uncanny is a kind of doubling we can see Poe’s relationship to poetic praxis as uncanny. On the one hand his poetics (which in Poe’s case must include prose works) is a kind of supernatural corridor through which to glimpse divine presence and on the other a series of hoaxes; the scramble of signifier and signified, a signal in need of decoding. In this Poe is the first truly modern writer. Rosicrucianism, which began as a hoax and evolved into a legitimate spiritual vehicle, might equally be considered the first truly modern religion, the beginning of the New Age. There is no Absolute Truth, but only what one can form into an provisionally intelligible system. And, since every system can be no more than an overlay imposed by the viewer upon reality, but never the reality itself, there is always at work a kind of deception. In both Poe’s poetics and the linguistic alchemy of Rosicrucianism there is an acknowledgment of deception (read as paradox) as integral to Truth. What is deceptive allows the poet/seeker to see the real that cannot be seen directly.

I’ve been a fascinated reader of Poe “from childhood’s hour.”¹ However the work of Thomas Vaughan (1621-1666) came to my awareness only after many-years research into alchemy, Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism. There is no obvious connection between Poe and Vaughan, and none has previously been

mentioned. I came upon a possible connection only by chance, but, although perhaps constructed by whimsy, clues suggesting that Poe had at the very least intuited, and perhaps read and internalized Vaughan's Rosicrucianism, with its attendant poetics, began to grow in substantiality with deeper investigation. Certainly Poe inherits from Coleridge the apparatus of Romanticism which shares with its alchemical predecessor a Utopian worldview as well as a purposive erasure of the dividing line between material and non-material domains. The ancient alchemists put forth the secret of the creation of the philosopher's stone as the intermixture and transmutation of elements understood not as common elements—which themselves had not been universally named yet—but as spiritual essences. Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism, respectively the philosophical and artistic arms of alchemy have an interestingly holographic structure. The alchemists employ an ever-shifting system of signifiers when it comes to naming the substance of our reality; what is substantial is taken up not as substance but as process. The holographic or autopoietic structure renders it less important if Poe imbibed alchemy firsthand from an alchemical tract, or secondhand through Blake or Coleridge, or whether he is indebted solely to the popular science of his day leavened by his imagination, he nevertheless is able to recreate the alchemical balancing of material with spiritual elements in his own Poe-esis.

Almost without effort of his own, Thomas Vaughan, twin brother of Henry, the metaphysical poet, steps into history. Born in Wales, he studied at Oxford, where he became a member of a circle of Paracelsus-inspired chemists, was ordained a minister, but accused of drunkenness (probably on political grounds) was dispossessed of his post. While Henry became one of England's most perfect poets, brother Thomas wrote a series of alchemical tracts. As Vaughan's tracts demonstrate, alchemical praxis is not discontinuous from its inscription into language and thereby forms a kind of poetry in itself.

The first uncanny connectivity I came to construe between the works of Poe and Vaughan occurs in Vaughan's tract *Lumen de Lumine* composed in 1651. Here we find repeated the distinct phrase often attributed to Poe, "Mountains of the Moon"² and even a detailed description thereof in one of the most striking scenes in alchemical lore. The substance of the tract is the underworld journey of Vaughan's literary double Eugenius led by Thalia, one of the three classical graces, Flowering, described by Vaughan as "always green."³ Thalia directs the narrator's attention to "the Mountain of the Moon" described as "glittering turrets of salt" from whence issues, she tells him, the source of the Nile. Eugenius observes "a stupendous cataract or waterfall"⁴ and narrates:

The waters were dashed and their current distracted by those saltish rocks; but for all this they came down with a dead silence—like the still, soft air. Some of this liquor—for it ran by me—I took up, to see what strange woolen substance it was that did thus steal down like snow... A viscous, fat, mineral nature it was, bright like pearls and transparent like crystal... somewhat spermatic...obscene to the sight but much more to the touch.

Hereupon Thalia told me it was the First Matter and the very natural, true sperm of the great world.⁵

In truth, the mountains of the moon dates to a conceit of Ptolemaic geography of an invisible mountain somewhere in Northern Africa and said to be the source of the Nile. The term had been in popular usage, but typically in a geographical sense—as a place far away and hard to get to. In "Eldorado" Poe plays upon the paradox implicit in this "invisible mountain" in a way recognizably deriving from alchemical sources. In this he is preceded only by Vaughan, who offers to the Ptolemaic conceit an esoteric, not to mention strikingly sensual dimension. Occultist A.E. Waite makes mention in three separate footnotes that this image as applied to alchemy is absolutely unique to Vaughan.

There are other connections as well, conceptual as well as linguistic. Vaughan places great stress on the alchemical concept of "*caput mortuum*,"⁶ equivalent with the alchemical stage of *nigredo*, putrefaction, the death from which all life arises. One of the points offered by critic Saint Armand in his reading of "The Gold Bug" as alchemical parable is the narrator's mention of "the queerest *scarabæus* in the world...*Scarabæus caput hominis*."⁷ Vaughan and his wife Rebecca conducted alchemical experiments preparing or involving such a *scarabæus* as well as the *aquaregis* mentioned by Legrand as an ingredient for invisible ink. As Saint Armand notes, the very notion of cryptograms is closely related to the expressed Rosicrucian desire to make a new language, a sort of "Magick writing"⁸ which would allow for the conveyance of direct mystical experience. The Rosicrucian project involves a conscious search for alternatives to the Aristotelian notion of language as a tool for mimesis. "Learn to refer all naturals to their spirituals by the way of secret analogy; for this is the way the magicians...found out miracles,"⁹ as Vaughan puts it. The Rosicrucians turned to a special language code—"with all is expressed and declared the nature of all things."¹⁰ Liminality is stressed in Hermetic and Rosicrucian texts through riddle, paradox, enigma and a dynamism of symbolization in which an image may represent one thing in a particular context but another thing altogether in another setting. Vaughan articulates a poetics equating poetry with magic, and continues a lineage of poetic speculation embracing paradox, enigma and unsaying that continues into contemporary times.

Saint Armand resists Burton Pollin's identification of the source of Poe's knowledge of alchemy as Isaac D'Israeli's 1834 work *Curiosities of Literature*.¹¹ I too would suggest that Poe's understanding of the Hermetic art is deeper than can be easily explained. St. Armand notes that one of the books tumbling from the shelves of Usher's library in the climax of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is "*The Chiromancy of Robert Fludd*." Here, as so often in Poe, we encounter an esoteric joke that might only be funny to an informed Rosicrucian, which Fludd certainly was, but D'Israeli was certainly not. That such a volume actually existed is itself questionable. I find no such work in any bibliography of Fludd at my disposal. What its existence would literally mean however was that Fludd was writing about palm reading. There is then in Poe's reference a double-encoding. This is a book about reading—the decoding of lines upon one's palm as a system able to reference one's fate. What is significant then is not simply that Poe mentions Fludd (this much he *could* have obtained from D'Israeli) but the inter-inter textuality of Poe's jest.

Poe's esoteric humor also shows itself in the little joke of the narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado" about Masonry at Montresor's expense shows a kind of cunning untelling of the truth.¹ And what of the sources of Vaughan himself? He speaks of himself (I note, the italics being my own) as "an *usher* to the train"¹² that includes a lineage stretching from Hermes Trismegistus to Paracelsus to Giordano Bruno. Bruno's "*Spaccio de la bestia trionfante* [*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*] published in Paris was an outcome of lectures delivered at Oxford in 1583 and later closely studied by Coleridge. Here, Bruno writes quite meaningfully of the raven as imbued with "Gloomy Blackness, Croaking Loquacity, Indecent and Gypsy-like Imposture...Odious Affrontery [and] Blind Contempt."¹³ Such character traits—if one would count "Loquacity" as the endless repetition of a single word—are the very soul of Poe's raven too. It would not be unimaginable that among "The Raven"'s grieving poet's "many a quaint and curious volume[s] of forgotten lore"¹⁴ was Bruno's *Spaccio* since here one finds a rather complete concordance of raven lore stretching from ancient Babylon in Old Testament writings to classical Greek times.¹⁵ Bruno's raven is clearly a symbolic figuration of the alchemical *nigredo*. This concept implies that death is a continuum, one stage of a larger system, what Vaughan calls the

¹DeQuincey made ample note of the ties between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. See Keplinger.

“system or fabric”¹⁶ of existence. “I look on this life as the progress of an essence royal; the soul but quits her court to see the country,”¹⁷ Vaughan writes breathtakingly. If Vaughan used the deep-image “Mountains of the Moon” in an exclusively alchemical sense it is hard to escape the parallel implied by the search for the ever-elusive Eldorado with the science of the transmutation of physical elements into the paradoxically named philosopher’s stone, or gold, or universal elixir.

Rosicrucianism draws from Hermeticism in positing the existence of other worlds containing spiritual entities, to which the practitioner (or his double) may travel to gain special information. Alchemical, Hermetic and Rosicrucian traditions are alike in stressing visions, prophetic dreams, trance-states and out-of-the-body experiences as means of obtaining extrasensory information. Poe shows a marked fascination with otherworldly topologies, from the wandering star of “Al-Aaraaf” to the “hideously serene”¹⁸ underwater underworld of “City in the Sea.”

Poe’s Otherworld, accessed through dreams and melancholy, refuses to remain ethereal, but intrudes unwelcomely on those who would attempt to deny its existence. “Ulalume”’s hapless narrator is a somnambulist seemingly propelled by the poem’s long, slow, repetitive measures through a “ghoul-haunted woodland”¹⁹ to the cemetery where he’d buried his wife a year before. When confronted by his wife’s “legended tomb”²⁰ the narrator is shocked: he has been walking unconsciously, in a trance, oblivious to both time and place, the entire way. “This is nothing but dreaming,” the somnambulist remarks, noting not the irony of his remark, for it is then that he is rudely awakened by the tomb door and the stark reality of death, the entombed contents of his repressed unconscious.

Most uncanny of connections between Poe and Vaughan is uncanniness itself. There is doubling, yes, but also a redoubling *ad infinitum*. The identical twin, Thomas, does not himself profess Rosicrucianism but instead hands this role over to his pseudonymous double Eugenius Philalethes in tracts appended to which are yet other discourses penned by obviously fictitious brothers of the Rosicrucian order. We see, therefore, the endless proliferation of signifying identities as coherency of authorship and stability of narrative are ruptured time and time again. Poe’s contextual ruptures and instabilities are well known; it is however his doubling as a matter of form that interests me here. Poe uses writing rather as an alchemist’s alembic or vehicle of transformation. The discourses themselves are uncanny. Is *Eureka* for instance a work of natural philosophy or a science fiction tale? Is “The Imp of the Perverse” a philosophical essay or a murder mystery? Has the unnamed narrator killed William Wilson at the end of the tale or is it himself who dies?

A curious and somewhat eerie remnant remains of the marriage of Thomas and Rebecca Vaughan, a notebook titled by Thomas *Aqua Vitæ: Non Vitis*, containing a record of alchemical experiments conducted by Thomas and his youthful wife, a loose-knit collection of recipes in Latin for the preparation of such things as “the juice of lunaria,”²¹ the same luminous, mystical herb said to grow on the peaks of the mountains of the moon. At some point in its composition, probably shortly after Rebecca’s death, Thomas turned the quarto volume back-forward and upside-down, and began writing from what had been the notebook’s last page. Here, after passing the quarto as if through a looking glass, he rededicates the volume to the memory of Rebecca and begins writing in English. In entries dated during the two years following his wife’s death, Thomas details a remarkable series of dreams that give a hint of the deep spiritual nature of his connection with Rebecca, even as the recipe collection gives a glimpse into the dyadic nature of what was really a mutual undertaking, the preparation of the Universal Elixir of the Rosicrucians, sometimes spoken of by Vaughan as a “Universal Menstruum” or “Animated Stone.”²² Vaughan records a recurrence in his own dream-life of Rebecca’s earlier dream of being pursued by a “stone=horse”²³ presaging her death. Vaughan, fearing the dream might foreshadow his own death,

flees Wapping where he had resided with Rebecca to seek the protection of a certain knight of his acquaintance. Weirdly enough the dream turns out to be coincident with the death of a certain Wappingalchemist known to Vaughan.

In subsequently recorded dreams, the form of Rebecca appears to Vaughan and tells him that she will die again "about a Quarter of a yeare from the time that shee appeared to mee."²⁴ Again the writer has the presentiment that the dream-form of his departed wife is prophesying his own demise. But again the dream is, as it were, in code, and seems in retrospect to refer to the death of Vaughan's father, which within two months of the dream-Rebecca's prediction does indeed take place. In another dream Vaughan is again with his wife in the middle of a church-yard in the middle of, Vaughan reports, "the Brightest day-light...that ever I beheld."²⁵ Here, Vaughan has an encounter with what Jung might term a shadow figure, a drunkard of his former acquaintance, an ultimate figuration of negativity, absence and that death coinciding with the alchemical stage of *nigredo*. He negotiates successfully with the shade (passes through *nigredo*) and then records:

I turned back to looke upon my Wife, and shee appeared to mee in greene silks down to the ground, and much taller, and slenderer then shee was in her life time, but in her face there was so much glorie, and beautie, and noe Angell in Heaven can have more.²⁶

That is, Rebecca appears to Thomas likened unto Vaughan's apprehension of the grace, Thalia, the "always green" in his underworld visitation to the Mountains of the Moon. The constant presence of his beloved, even after her death, is hinted at in many of Poe's works. But that Poe's grief does yield itself to poesy hints that Poe uses writing rather as an alchemist's alembic or vehicle of transformation. In *Aqua*, Vaughan records that only on the anniversary of his wife's illness, is he able to recall and successfully enact the extraction of a certain of "oyle of Halcali"²⁷ credited with miraculous healing properties. Vaughan, increasingly absorbed by his dream-life, becomes rather like the sorrowful somnambulist in "Ulalume" always scudding up against his wife's absence as a sort of presence, her presence as an absence.

There has been some question as to exactly what the nature was of the experimentation conducted by Thomas and Rebecca and inscribed in Vaughan's notebook. Thomas declared his efforts to be within the realm of "philosophical alchemy" and decried the "torture of metals"²⁸ yet perished through due to inhalation of mercury fumes during a laboratory experiment. Kenneth Rexroth hints that the Vaughan's were engaged in some sort of tantric yoga.²⁹ Meanwhile, there has been a movement in recent years to draw alchemical, Hermetic and Rosicrucian writing into the grand parade of ever advancing scientific knowledge by conflating the conventional Baconian scientific methodology derided by Poe in *Eureka* and "MellonaTauta" as well as by Blake before himⁱⁱ with Paracelsan experience-based wisdom. Paracelsus, with his emphasis on a medical practice in contradistinction to Galen, was early prey; even attempts to subsume Bruno have followed.

The Vaughans receive this treatment by Dickson, who tries to showcase the Vaughan notebooks as a primitive iatrochemical treatise, but only by mischaracterizing the Vaughan's as the "experimental philosophers" who largely comprised the Oxford circle with the Vaughans' own preferred epithet "spiritual alchemists."³⁰ Although offering much needed solid biographical data on both Vaughans, Dickson loses the ironic meaning offered by a Vaughan quotation from the book of Daniel, which also forms an epigraph to Bacon's *Novum Organum* in an attempt to make Vaughan a firm Baconian,³¹ while a famous controversy in which Vaughan became embroiled involved the contention that his work was

ⁱⁱ "Self Evident Truth is one Thing and Truth the result of Reasoning is another Thing Rational Truth is not the Truth of Christ but of Pilate" (621). See Blake.

overridden by (what was then termed, and fatally) *enthusiasm*, a pulling away from the mechanistic tenets of Baconian thought.

There is a difference between Baconian versus Paracelsan empiricism. Experimentation in the Paracelsan tradition embraced by Vaughan has an essential phenomenological dimension. NOW is experienced as processual, moving, but *qua* experience it is one, integral, whole. For Paracelsus the empirical meant in alignment with the actuality of lived experience. The healer-chemist was keen to convey and put into practice the old folk wisdom of the wise-women and shamans, always based predominantly on experience. What Empiricism comes to mean after Bacon, is experimentation but conducted as it were on lifeless matter, or purely through mathematics, but with the observer lost in the observation. The advances of classical science brought with them also a loss: the loss of the imagination as an actual faculty of knowing, a sidereal sense-modality, rather than a fanciful adjunct to the daydreaming mind. "Seek what Holosachne may be,"³² Vaughan counsels. This 'substance', literally of complete tenderness quite baffles the iatrochemical bias of Dickson, and this shows the danger of going too far in ascribing exoteric to esoteric methodologies and findings. The truth, Eldorado, always lies somewhere in between.

Both Poe and Vaughan are quite pointedly anti-Aristotelian and observe a liminal space between actuality and its formulation. Vaughan writes of nature that "she is a middle nature between thick and thin."³³ This implied interstice between defined spaces, however, is actually not an interstice proper but a series of connectivities that only *appear* in opposition. Here we enter the field of paradox proper whose relationship to quantifiable reality is perhaps best taken up by Zeno, Lewis Carroll or Douglas Hofstadter. Here also we might encounter Bruno's soul atoms; Poe's non-particled matter; Jung and Pauli's psycho-physical 4-dimensional quantum universe; Reich's blurring of organic and inorganic domains;³⁴ Jean Gebser's "concretion of the spiritual"; and the Gurdjieffian notion that 'even spirit is physical.'

Poe had read Coleridge, who had written commentary on the Bruno Oxford lectures. In "The Poetic Principle" Poe mentions Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy. That there should be some distinction drawn between mere fancy and the quasi-divine powers of the imagination is an affirmation of Bruno's apprehension of the imagination as an organ, not of one of the five senses, but of the astral body. For Poe, this allows our being led by the poem "to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before" and to "experience, at once, the true poetical effect...referable to the harmony alone, and not in the least degree to truth which merely served to render the harmony manifest."³⁵ The magical poetics espoused by Hermetic thinkers from Proclus (412-485 C.E.) onward stresses poetry's non-mimetic function. Poetic language for Vaughan as for Bruno and Proclus does not imitate reality but symbolizes it in a special, oblique way that establishes communication with a more intensified degree of reality. "One thing is hinted at by another," Proclus writes. "It is not a relationship of model to copy, but of symbol to something else which has a sympathy with it by virtue of analogy."³⁶ Paradoxically, the symbol indicates the nature of the real by presenting precisely "what is most strongly antithetical to it."³⁷

Poe shares with Vaughan and his tradition the construction of a cosmography, the writing of the universe. The early Greek cosmographies come to us in a fractured, fragmented, state which does not, however, prevent us from making certain guesses about their nature. It would seem that from the earliest appearance of the world's cosmographies in Sumeria, Egypt and Judea—arose first in mythic form in the clay, stone or vegetable papyrus upon which they are inscribed almost contemporaneously with humankind's ability to write them down. Jean Gebser would draw a distinction between mythic and mental paradigms—between the cosmology embraced by Hesiod and the

philosophy of mind that seems to with Parmenides. But such a division is not so always so clear. Thales and Pythagoras draw from "mythic" Egypt. Among pre-Platonic philosophers those whose works are most widely preserved belong to Empedocles, whose reliance on mythic conceptions for Earth, Air, Fire and Water was overlooked, sometimes intentionally, by the Aristotelian Peripatetics. In fact, Parmenides's essential struggle between Night and Day has been shown to have powerful mythic content by Heideggerian scholar Luanne Franks. Gebser's elegant delineation between mythic and mental paradigms must still yet come to face Parmenides's most brilliant pupil (perhaps discounting Socrates) Zeno, whose famous paradox leads us to wonder if anything can be proved sheerly by reference to the Mental. Poe's cosmography *Eureka* stands in this lineage of comographies, and foresees a fatal deficiency of the mental paradigm, as Cartesian dualism takes over. Poe was fascinated by the scientific theorizing of his day: and so his science is rather a heap of sometimes disinvolved and contradicting theories (Newtonianism, Galvanism, Laplacean nebulosity, Parmenidean inalterability). However, having solved the riddle of the universe, Poe himself expired the very next year, and this lends to *Eureka* a certain gravitas that it may not mean to invoke. McKenna, in his discussion of the *I Ching*, defines any given entity not as a thing but as an evolving process requiring a given, indivisible span of time, or epoch, for its realization. The lifespan or epoch of any given entity may vary widely. A mayfly calls but 48 hours a lifetime, while an elephant may live a century. Every entity requires its full epoch to realize itself as a unified totality of process. Its full identity as a realized actuality depends on its full epoch of evolving becoming.

In this view the moral of "The Conqueror Worm" is not simply that the worm has us all in the end; it *is* us in the end. The events which comprise life can only be said to having been fully faced up to or been blown in one direction or another according to the moment of its cessation of its growth. Perhaps this is the reason why Poe favored nothing more in his estimation of beauty as a lovely *dead* woman. In "Anabelle Lee" he would even seem to extend this image the decomposing female corpse. But in stories such as "Berenice" Poe looks for precisely that instant between life and death. Because that is as beautiful as this once living thing is going to get. That he problematizes this moment is further shown in "A Mesmeric Revolution." Poe's aesthetics, poetics and natural philosophy are intertwined. Some critics give Poe plaudits for foreseeing the Big Bang/Big Crunch theories currently enjoying a seemingly serene reign atop the heap of cosmological theories. It would indeed be a happy state-of-affairs if, proceeding purely from newspaper clippings and encyclopedia articles, a few popular science books and perhaps Coleridge, Poe was able to ascertain the ultimate truth of the Cosmos. However, such critics fail to point out that Poe's Universe runs wrong-way-round: it is drawing together, toward the ultimate Unity he was always looking for, while Hawking will tell you it is still expanding and will until it reaches a critical mass that can never seem to be accounted for in agonizing measurements and re-measurements of mass.

The Big Bang theory that the universe appeared out of a singularity ten to twenty years ago is, as a colleague admitted to me some years ago, "A point of faith." Indeed the universe's creation from some infinite tininess twenty billion years ago runs parallel to Genesis accounts when placed alongside the gravitational theory demonstrated by Newton with its implicit acceptance of atomic theory little changed since the time of Democritus. Francisco Varela's theory of autopoiesis when applied cosmologically questions whether there really needs to be a beginning or end, or rather whether such a concept really has any meaning. Radical astral-biologist Rupert Sheldrake is famous for his assertion that all classical science asks for is just one miracle to be able to create a universe. "Fiat Lux."

Newton never called himself a scientist, but, as did Poe, thought of himself as a natural philosopher in the tradition of the ancient Greeks. As such he was part of an unbroken stream of knowledge and wisdom that began the

shamans, and continues even into the Pre-Socratics and Plato himself. All those adapting a first-person phenomenological base are in agreement with Poe's "unparticled matter."³⁸ For "God is material,"³⁹ the spiritual *is* physical. Western scientific discourse from Aristotle onward can no longer grant credence to the immaterial aspect of matter (or material aspect of the spiritual) while in the East they long ago realized the relation of *qi* or *jing*, the subtle energies resulting from a fusion of the physical, spiritual and mental.

The search for the philosopher's stone is allegorized in Poe's "Eldorado" as the search by a knight for an elusive city of gold. The poem's operative field is paradox since in order to find Eldorado the knight must search through impossible locations. The Invisible Mountain located on the Ptolamaic map is as impossible a traverse as the "valley of the shadow," since while the former is purely imaginary the latter is that land from whose bourn no traveler returns. So, at the knight's imprecation he is instructed by the Shadow that he must needs keep searching, yes, but more than this he must discover the impossible. What is impossible is what is complete. One can never complete one's own autobiography, for example, since completion would signal death. The movement Poe makes in *Eureka*, and what renders it more a tale of science-fiction than a work of pop science, is to assert that the answer to the riddle of the universe has at last been found. There is, however, a delirium in the narrator's tone, the fervid voice of one who has seen the light. The resultant conversion narrative, however, implodes in on itself—the same end as Poe predicts for the universe. The still promised Theory of Everything can never materialize not so much because the universe would, in deference to the theorists, cease growing or shrinking or whatever it's doing—but because it would be the end of imagination as an operative force. This runs counter to what the Hermetic philosophers were saying, and the distance between the two views as far as the distance between Paracelsan and Baconian empiricism. In *Eureka* Poe takes the imagination for, as it were, one last spin. But the story is not really over since the Theory of Everything remains always in the offing while the human imagination continues to blossom. Remember Vaughan's *Thalia*, modeled on his wife Rebecca, means Flowering.

The Hermetic supposition is that there is a correspondence between all things. "As above, so below," writes Hermes Trismegistus. In "On the Priestly Art According to the Greeks," Proclus writes:

Why do heliotropes move together with the sun, selenotropes with the moon, moving around to the extent of their ability with the luminaries of the cosmos? All things pray according to their own order and sing hymns, either intellectually or rationally or naturally or sensibly... And since the heliotrope is also moved toward that to which it readily opens, if anyone hears it striking the air as it moves about, he perceives in the sound that it offers to the king the kind of hymn that a plant can sing.⁴⁰

Poe's "The Poetic Principle" isolates Love as the ultimate cause which produces in the reader "*the elevating excitement of the Soul*"⁴¹ and makes of love an elemental poetic principle. "Without this Love the elements will never be married,"⁴² Vaughan writes. For both Poe and Vaughan Love is apprehended in its aspect as Eros, a fusion of lover and beloved, rather the Dionean Venus, with implications of objectification of the beauty-object. Poe echoes Proclus when he writes in "The Poetic Principle":

[The Poet] recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes his soul, in the bright orbs that shine in heaven—in the volutes of the flower... He owns it in all noble thoughts—in all unworldly motives—in all holy impulses—in all chivalrous, generous and self-sacrificing deeds. He feels it in the beauty of woman—in the grace of her step—in the lustre of her eye... but above all—ah! Far above all...he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty—of her *love*.⁴³

Both Poe and Vaughan continued to practice the Blakean "active imagination," even as it leads them irretrievably "Over the mountains of the moon/And down the valley of the shadow." Vaughan's journal records heart-breaking failures to reduplicate experiments Thomas and Rebecca had successfully undertaken together during her life. Poe, for his part, never stopped his activities as a working writer. Although he considered *Eureka* his greatest work, he still had one ace up his sleeve. This was to be a periodical over which he might exert absolute control to be entitled *The Stylus*. Although it went unrealized, the title of the envisioned work might easily make us rethink Poe, to position him not only in American but in world literature. A stylus was an instrument used by the ancients for writing on clay or waxed tablets, by the printers of Poe's day as a cutting device used to make stencils for reproducing machines, or, even beyond Poe's day a needle used to cut the groove for a Dictaphone or disk recording or a pen-shaped pointing device used for entering data into a computer. The title of the seems in itself worth the price of a subscription. The stylus is perhaps humanities' greatest invention, instrumental in conveying entire cultures through from the days of the Sumerians to Poe's day and even unto the present age. *The Stylus*, then, was the work that never existed except in Poe's imagination: it was Poe's true Eldorado.

CONCLUSIONS

Both Vaughan and Poe show us how suffering flowers into art, how *nigredo* gives way to all the luminous colors of the spectrum. It is suggestive to me that Poe concludes his "Poetic Principle" with a short verse, Motherwell's "The Song of the Cavalier." The bold knight of "Eldorado", the embodiment of all "chivalrous, generous and self-sacrificing deeds,"⁴⁴ stands in for both poet and alchemist. For the searching is *already* the finding. Every secret stands revealed through the very act of inquiry. Despite every heartbreak there is love. And so one soldier on, some aged cavalier, forever on the way to Eldorado.

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¹Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. 1026.

²Thomas Vaughan, *The Works of Thomas Vaughan*. 247 et al.

³Vaughan, 247.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. 21

⁷Poe, "Gold" 44

⁸Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, "Rosicrucian Linguistics: Twilight of Renaissance Tradition." *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*. Washington D.C.: Folger Books(1988):313

⁹Thomas Vaughan, 116.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Barton St. Armand, "Poe's 'Sober Mystification': The Uses of Alchemy in 'The Gold Bug.'" *Poe Studies* vol. IV, no. 1 (June, 1971): 3.

¹²Vaughan, 137.

¹³Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. Trans, Arthur D. Imirti. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press(1964): 87.

¹⁴Poe, "The Raven" 943.

¹⁵Bruno 265-267.

¹⁶Vaughan, 269.

¹⁷Vaughan, 5.

¹⁸Poe, “City in the Sea”, 964.

¹⁹Poe, “Ulalume” 952.

²⁰Poe, “Ulalume” 953.

²¹Thomas and Rebecca Vaughan, and Rebecca Vaughan. *Aqua Vitæ: Non Vitis*. Trans. Donald R. Dickson. Tempe: AZ: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (2001) 221.

²²Ibid. 179.

²³Ibid. 245.

²⁴Ibid. 203.

²⁵Ibid. 234

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid. 31.

²⁸Vaughan, *Works* 385.

²⁹Kenneth Rexroth, “Foreword to the Works of Thomas Vaughan.” *The Works of Thomas Vaughan*. New York: University Books (1968): 10.

³⁰Donald R. Dickson, “Introduction.” *Aqua Vitæ: Non Vitis*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (2001): xxxii.

³¹Ibid. xxxiii.

³²Vaughan, *Aqua* 201.

³³Vaughan, 196.

³⁴Wilhelm Reich, “Vegetative Life Functions.” *The Impulsive Character and Other Writings*. Trans. Barbara G. Koopman. Cleveland: World Publishing Company (1974): 85.

³⁵Poe, “The Poetic Principle” 906

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³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Edgar Allan Poe, “Letter to Lowell,” *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books (1978): 375.

³⁹Ibid. 377

⁴⁰Proclus trans. in Copenhaver, Brian. “Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance.” *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*. Washington D.C.: Folger Books (1988): 103

⁴¹Poe, “The Poetic Principle” 906.

⁴²Vaughan, 283.

⁴³Poe, “The Poetic Principle” 906.

⁴⁴Ibid.